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Miranda Dyson

Cedarville University, mdyson@cedarville.edu

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Moved to Mourning

Miranda Dyson

My hand reached for the remote to turn the channel. “Another shooting, how depressing,” I thought. Not long after I removed CNN from my sight, I removed mourning for a killed man from my agenda. My kneejerk response to the killings of African American citizens, such as the victims of the shooting in Charleston, has been to cover or ignore the wound of racial tension in our society. I was often able to justify pushing this uncomfortable topic out of sight. This desire to put aside mourning and ignore the struggles black communities endure is one that poet and Professor Claudia Rankine addresses in her article: “The Condition of Black Life is one of Mourning” in the New York Times Magazine. Overall, I didn’t feel like I could relate to most of what she depicted as a “black life”; however, I gained insight into how some African Americans view life, and I was saddened to read of the despair they feel, yet I now better understand and appreciate the Black Lives Matter movement.

Rankine, a poet and professor at Pomona College, wrote her article shortly after the shooting in Charleston. Rankine writes about how African Americans have a constant feeling of being stuck—trapped—in their own country. She talks about the fear and mourning that black citizens constantly experience that white Americans cannot totally empathize with. Furthermore, Rankine states that America has become saturated in anti-black racism and views the death of black Americans as common. She states that Americans can be in the midst of death yet choose ignorance over recognition. She reviews the history of several black deaths in America, such as the death of Emmitt Till, and points out that including mourning in everyday life can leave a lasting positive impression on society as it sees truth. Rankine states that the Black Lives Matter movement agrees with this logic and is therefore devoted to keeping the mourning of African Americans on the forefront of our minds. In closing she states, “A sustained state of national mourning for black lives is called for...” In addition, she says

that with the Black Lives Matter movement we have a way to interrupt our daily routine for the better. Rankine ends by saying that grief for the dead could be part of the solution to harmony with the living.

By reading this article I gained insight into how some African Americans view life. For example, Rankine opens by quoting an African American woman's reaction to her son's birth: "When she gave birth to her son...her first thought was, 'I have to get him out of this country.'" The reason behind this person's sarcastic statement was because she didn't see America as having a place for her son. I was shocked to read such a frank statement because I, as a biracial American with an African American parent, don't see America as a place of bondage as this statement implies. I suppose my view comes from growing up looking forward to what America has to offer and from seeing people, of many ethnicities around me, love this country. My initial feelings towards America aren't hostility and resentment. This article gave me insight to many African Americans' view life as I've never had the self-consciousness about my ethnicity which some African Americans bear. My parents never emphasized my ethnic difference or taught me that my chances to be "free" were limited because of my race. I wasn't taught to fear people in higher authority, nor did I see my father, an African American fearing the police. Throughout my childhood years, I was surrounded and befriended by people of Chinese, African, Hispanic, and Caucasian ethnicities. None of those relationships were strained because of my race. Since I wasn't immersed in a "black" culture and none of my African American friends complained of racism or struggles related to their race, I never learned to see my skin as part of my identity.

Therefore, I was enlightened further when Rankine's article states that many African Americans would say that their ethnicity carries significant weight. A woman quoted in Rankine's article who was asked what it's like being the mother of a black son says, "The condition of black life is one of mourning." Initially, I felt like this point of view was cynical, even though I know that viewpoint is a reality for many, because I haven't lived a life with violence and death as common in my community. All my life I've lived in relatively calm neighborhoods where I never saw my ethnicity was never cause to be afraid. I was never in fear for my life when a white

officer would cruise on the street where I lived. I've never had the experience of mourning a loved one killed by unjust means. Race-related death has never affected me personally, so I don't have fuel for the thought pattern of seeing black lives in a state of constant mourning. Despite my initial thoughts, Rankine is actually giving the appropriate amount of weight to a subject that I'd previously thought disproportionate. Through the description of African American killings, I was shown that cynicism isn't what fuels these movements. Unfortunately, many of the despairing feelings African Americans hold are completely realistic.

In addition, I was saddened to read of the despair that some African Americans feel. In this article, Rankine talks about how she and her friend feel about their position in America saying, "Ours was the laughter of vulnerability, fear, recognition and absurd stuckness." Although I don't feel "stuck" as a biracial American, I was saddened to read that some people live with that constant weight. As far as I know, I've never experienced racism so I don't feel "stuck" in my society. I haven't been inhibited from attending the University of my choice, receiving equal pay as my Caucasian co-workers, or pursuing happiness because of my race, so I don't feel limited in my opportunity at success. In my own life, I know several black Americans who are successful in society and I can't recall any who are burdened by their ethnicity. My father did endure racism in his life, but he was never deterred from his aspirations, and I've only ever seen him as successful in every line of work he's pursued. Though I'm sure his racist encounters greatly affected him, I never witnessed the direct effect they had on him. My aunt, who is also African American, worked at CNN for over thirty years where, from what I could tell, she was well respected and successful. Now that I've been exposed to several racist issues Americans face that I wasn't aware of, I'm more open to asking questions of my family in order to rid myself of other racial blind spots I may have. I was always told, from both sides of my family, that I could do whatever I wanted in life. Although cliché, it's a thought that doesn't transcend every culture.

Furthermore, as if constantly feeling stuck weren't bad enough, Rankine also writes about black Americans' continuous mourning, saying, "For African American families, this living in a state of mourning and fear remains commonplace." It's sad for me

to think that mourning for loved ones' lives could be commonplace especially since I've never had to live in that state. The thought that young black American men and women aren't surprised when they hear the news reports of killings appalls me. I'm overwhelmed thinking about the constant anxiety that some African Americans face just leaving their homes or watching their children walk to school. My parents have natural fears when my siblings and I aren't with them, but they aren't obsessed about our interactions with officers while we're out of the house.

Therefore, I benefitted from reading Rankine's article because I better understood and appreciated the "Black Lives Matter" movement, an organization dedicated to continuing the mourning process in America. I sometimes ignore movements that arise after shootings because they're sometimes led with reckless and bitter motivation. However, this movement is anything but bitter and has an admirable goal in mind. Rankin writes, "The Black Lives Matter movement can be read as an attempt to keep mourning an open dynamic in our culture..." I can't count how many times and how easily I've dismissed the turmoil shown in the news simply by changing channels. I put my personal desire to be comfortable under the guise of being optimistic. If I feel overburdened with bad news, there's little motivation to keep watching. I believe that too often people choose to close off mourning because it's such an exhausting process. Denial—a state that many Americans are in concerning racial tensions—also smothers the effects of mourning. Black Lives Matter believes in the value of mourning.

Rankine further gives understanding about the Black Lives Matter movement when she tells the story of Emmitt Till, a murdered African American killed in 1955, and his mother, Mamie Till Mobley. Emmitt Till's body was beaten beyond recognition as the result of racist motivation. Mobley made the decision to have an open casket funeral for her son. She said she wanted to "let the people see what I see." She, like those in the Black Lives Matter movement, valued mourning and wanted others to mourn with her. Rankine says, "Mobley's refusal to keep grief private allowed a body that meant nothing to the criminal-justice system to stand as evidence." Mobley's courage overwhelmed me. She didn't just see the injustice done to her son, but also an opportunity to bring a racist justice system into light. I think it's a great pity to see a mother's source of mourning turned into a national piece of evidence.

Rankine's article calls her readers to action: Not to dismiss black communities' complaints as dramatized, to understand another culture's viewpoint, and not to walk over dead men without giving them a second thought. Since I didn't feel like I could relate to most of what she depicted as a black life, this article gave me insight into how some African Americans view life. I was saddened to read of the despair that they feel, yet I now better understand and appreciate the Black Lives Matter movement and the value of mourning. Articles like this one help me to value analyzing the effect of racial tensions in American society. Although it's still painful to watch and read of injustices, acknowledging that there is an issue doesn't have to be simply depressing; mourning is a way to value lives in our country. I look forward to the day where killings don't feel commonplace in African American communities and when those deaths move our society to mourn.

Work Cited

Rankine, Claudia. "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning." *The New York Times Magazine*. The New York Times, Co. 21 June 2015. Web. 13 Sept. 2015